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**On Teaching the Holocaust
as History**

by

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ON TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST AS HISTORY

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University courses on the Holocaust began to proliferate in the late 1970s. Till then, the whole subject of genocide had been dealt with only marginally in university courses, if at all. What is surprising is how quickly Holocaust courses spread in North America. After all, most university courses still cover wide spans of times, a century or more. Courses on the Holocaust were driven by an extraordinary Jewish determination to record the event. While such courses could only be mounted because first-class monographs, texts, and documents on the subject were increasingly available, the motives for studying the Holocaust were not only in order to comprehend, but also to commemorate the memory of the victims, to air recriminations toward perpetrators and indifferent bystanders, and to draw practical lessons for the future. One could not study the Holocaust the same way one studied the collapse of the Old Regime in France, constructing a nexus of causes and effects. So much suffering and so much barbarism called for an adequate response, something more engaged with the subject than detached analysis.

In teaching the Holocaust, we are involved in a novel enterprise. Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn have noted that historians habitually drove genocides into the background when weighing key forces and patterns in history. There are several reasons for this: for one, peoples and cultures who have disappeared usually have few surviving advocates and resources to collect the documents of their destruction; this only underlines that history is usually written by victors or prospective ones, who see the course of events as positive, amenable to their own historic destiny and mission; finally, in modern times the Enlightenment faith in progress, favored by historians, has led them to glide over tragedies or emphasize how tragedies have contributed to positive trends in history; allied to this, those who share the Enlightenment heritage have great difficulty in making sense of radical

and gratuitous evil.¹

Given such factors, it is no wonder that Gerd Korman concluded in a 1970 article, " Silence in the American Textbooks, " that apart from a few exceptions, textbooks of Western history treated the genocide of European Jewry as a piece of marginal information within the larger context of World War II atrocities. A subsequent study by Joel Epstein, of textbooks published between 1966 and 1985, showed that while some continued to treat the fate of the Jews as just one atrocity among many, a number now recognized the " distinctive " nature of the Holocaust. Though even those who did, Epstein noted, did not treat the Holocaust - a systematic campaign by a modern European state to eradicate a whole people from the face of the earth - " as a major historical event " in its own right.²

What is entailed in recognizing the Holocaust " as a major historical event?" For one, it means emphasizing its uniqueness; that the intent, ideology, and methods of the perpetrators set the Holocaust apart among genocides. On the matter of intent: while genocide was also directed against Christians - three million Poles were murdered by the Germans -in the case of the Jews the German state sought the utter and complete extinction of a people. All Jews were doomed simply by being born: no recantation, conversion or collaboration could spare anyone with Jewish parents. As for ideology: the extent of dehumanization of Jewry in Nazi ideology, viewed as demons incarnate, or as vermin, or parasites, was unparalleled. Antisemitism seems the only case of group hatred raised to a Weltanschauung: all the world's distress was explained as caused by the " Jewish world conspiracy." As to method: Germany's efficient bureaucracy and superb technology created a new mode of impersonal, assembly-line mass murder by gassing. In 1944, Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz at a rate of over 10,000 a day, the Jews of Lodz

at a rate of 20,000 a day. That a modern European state and society, celebrated for its achievements in education and culture, carried out this unprecedented crime, calls into question all our hopes placed in progress, humanity, indeed the very meaning of civilization.

For this reason, the Holocaust was an epoch-making event, a turning-point in history. As Alan Berger has insisted: as a revelation of humanity's capacity for evil, abetted by instruments of modern civilization, bureaucracy and technology, the Holocaust has put the question of the survival of civilization in the balance.³ Mass murder was perpetrated by dispassionate bureaucrats, without lust or sadism, as an onerous task, out of a sense of duty, obedience to orders, an ideological imperative. Nazism was no mere thuggish ideology, promoted by a Lumpen-intelligentsia; its supporters included respectable and prominent academics, theologians and scientists. University professors were involved in selecting the 80,000 mentally and physically disabled Germans gassed in the so-called euthanasia campaign. Many of the deadly medical experiments performed on concentration camp prisoners involved significant scientific research in such areas as contagious and epidemic diseases.⁴

Much of the literature on university teaching of the Holocaust is taken up with the problem of imparting the enormity and significance of the genocide of European Jewry. One school of thought addresses this problem by foresaking the ideal of scholarly objectivity. Fearful that the university setting, which encourages the retention of data and dispassionate analysis, will blunt feelings and moral sensibilities, and will make it all too easy for students to evade an experience that is profoundly upsetting, a number of academics recommend a departure from conventional university teaching. Richard Libowitz has argued that the Holocaust must, "assume the form of a revelatory event, students must

be taken...to the edge of the abyss and made to look down." David Blumenthal emphasizes his concern with "moral education." Thus his course, "deals with the horror, " and spurs students to a self-examination of their tendency, "to repress the material." Ruth Zerner, an historian, speaks of "encouraging emotional developments and insights.⁵ Academics in such courses freely express their own emotional and moral responses to the material, show Holocaust films, assign Holocaust memoirs and novels, have students keep subjective diaries, and invite survivors to the classroom to recount their horrifying and agonizing experiences.

I agree that teaching the Holocaust is not like teaching other courses; for one, it consumes and exhausts one's emotions. The events are so recent, so vivid; many who teach it have family members who perished in the Holocaust; finally, we have become more cognizant of the millions of victims crushed by history, and believe we must somehow convey the enormity of their ordeal. This frame of reference is missing when we deal with remoter genocides. It is hard to summon up a similar response when dealing with the Athenian annihilation of the men of the island of Melos and the enslavement of its women and children, almost 2,500 years ago. Time not only legitimizes conquests; it also renders human suffering abstract. For this reason, university courses on the Holocaust can help students become more sensitive to what Zerner calls, "the ultimate realities of modern oppression." But I disagree profoundly with the approach she and others take. They are right to be concerned with academic pitfalls in teaching the Holocaust, but these can be avoided without abandoning detachment and objectivity, our only guarantee against facile and self-serving conceptions of the subject.⁶ Those who favour the subjective approach recommend inviting Holocaust survivors to the classroom, to engage students' feelings and

moral sensibilities. But such an approach runs the danger of creating a morally coercive atmosphere, inhibiting unfettered analysis. Faced with Holocaust survivors come to impart their horrifying experiences, what student would dare quarrel with Professor Zerner's assertion that camp survivors teach us about, " the efficacy of those internal reservoirs of aesthetic and spiritual strength, which we can draw upon in crisis. " But the question of what made for survival in the camps is still an open one, and a student convinced of Bruno Bettelheim's argument that survival often depended on psychologically regressive behaviour, may well be made to feel that raising questions about the " indomitable " human spirit is akin to an act of sin. One by-product of welcoming Holocaust survivors to the classroom may be to ghettoize Holocaust courses. When Elie Wiesel taught in this manner at City College in New York, he attracted only Jewish students, a substantial number of whom were children of survivors.⁷

Wishing to deepen moral commitment, rather than spur detached analysis, this approach inevitably seeks unambiguous answers, straightforward " lessons " of the Holocaust. Accordingly, we are presented with simplistic explanations - often indiscriminately recriminatory - of what made the Holocaust possible. To take one example: several condemn what Alan Berger terms, " ethically unanchored objectivity, " promoted by modern science, the professions, universities, even by modern bureaucracy. " Value-free performance, " Berger insists, " is the hallmark of modernity." Presumably, such attitudes permitted perpetrators and bystanders to commit, abet or acquiesce in genocide without qualms. But was such objectivity popular in Germany? To the contrary, those who remember that Max Weber upbraided German university students for their political demonstrations in the lecture hall or for seeking " leaders, " " prophets, " and "

saviors " in their professors, rather than " teachers, " will realize that German universities were hotbeds of ideology, rather than bastions of detached objectivity. In his important study of German universities in the Weimar era, Fritz Ringer has spoken of the " ambiguous passivity " of academics toward Nazism. Through troubled by Nazi extremism, their " many affinities " to Nazi ideology paralyzed academic resistance. In the name of a coming " spiritual revolution, " academics rejected detached analysis and the fragmentation of knowledge created by modern specialization in favour of intuition, synthesis, and an integrated Weltanschauung that would support moral will, social cohesion, a sense of community. Not the ideal of analytic detachment, but its exact opposite favored Nazism.⁸

Similarly, the theologian Franklin Littell, insists the Holocaust has engendered a, " credibility crisis of Christianity, " for the Holocaust, " was done in Christendom by baptized Christians."⁹ Here too the matter is not so simple. Littell's crisis of religious conscience impedes historical clarity. After all, Nazism was an anti-Christian ideology, as much the product of modern secularism as of the heritage of Christian anti-Judaism. In the modern world religion is only one ideology among many shaping human action, and relatively weak in comparison with secular ideologies such as nationalism. The responses of Christians during the Holocaust were as varied as the national cultures, histories and secular ideologies that shaped them.

Morally and emotionally driven teaching such as I have described, favors morally unambiguous explanations of the Holocaust, offering clear prescriptions for human action. Such teaching is suspicious of detached analysis, which leads to a range of explanations, unsupportive of clear prescriptions. To take one example: the Danish rescue of Jewry by mass transport to neutral Sweden is an outstanding example of what was possible when

bystanders were not indifferent. But what provided Danes with the room for manoeuvre for this rescue was their non-resistance to the German invasion of their homeland, and their political and economic cooperation with Germany. Non-resistance and cooperation persuaded the German government to maintain a minimal occupying force in Denmark and to leave the Danish governing authorities in place. By contrast, Dutch resistance to the German invasion led to a draconian S.S. occupying presence in the Netherlands, and absolutely no room for manoeuvre on behalf of Jewish rescue. Almost all Danish Jews were saved; 75 percent of the Jews in the Netherlands were murdered. What are the lessons of the Holocaust?¹⁰

Consideration can be taken of the special subject matter of the Holocaust without forsaking ideals of objectivity. The problems raised by the subject are ones historians have long wrestled with: how to do justice to both the general and the concrete, to both abstract, impersonal forces acting on humanity in the mass, and to individual agonies, ordeals, fates, decisions.

To take one example: an approach fruitfully employed in historical analysis is the comparative one. There are notable contributions to the comparative literature on genocides. My colleague Robert Melson has studied the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust, and has shown how in each case the victims were a formerly despised minority, in an inferior political status under the old order, who had gone on to adapt well to the modern world. The minority's economic, social and political progress was felt to be illegitimate and threatening to the majority.¹¹ While useful in other contexts, my tendency in teaching the Holocaust, is not to dwell on comparisons. The impact of the event is stronger when it is studied for itself, rather than as one case among others. Certainly

indiscriminate comparison runs the danger of blunting our sense of the extraordinariness of the Holocaust. Another danger of comparative analysis, is that it lays stress on the role of macro-historical forces: colonialism, aggressive nationalism, racial supremacy. Such macro-historical explanations can foster determinism and even cynicism, the view that we are in the hands of larger forces that escape human control. Studying genocides as unique cases leads a greater emphasis on contingencies in history, the decisions and choices made by perpetrators, bystanders, even victims.

The merits of a general or concrete approach must also be weighed in investigating the role of bystanders in the Holocaust. It is easy enough to explain collective indifference, say Canada's exclusionist policy toward Jewish refugees after 1938, by pointing to larger historical forces, such as political expediency, provincialism, antisemitism, the ravages of the Depression, lack of foreknowledge of the Jewish fate. Similarly, the American decision not to bomb Auschwitz is understandable in terms of its long-standing policy of using the military for strategic missions only. Again, such a macro-historical approach can encourage determinism and cynicism. It is important to move to the micro-historical level as well, to deal with individual cases, those persons who went against the grain, from German officials who saved Jews by bureaucratic foot-dragging, to Poles who hid Jews at the risk of their lives. Hence the element of choice in human action can be highlighted, and the possibilities of moral action even in the most straitened circumstances.

Finally, teaching the Holocaust raises the question of the limits of acceptable debate. In university teaching we are ruled by the principle of academic freedom, based on the belief that we arrive closest to the truth when all interpretations can be freely examined. Indeed our moral and intellectual authority as academics rests on our dedication to the

ideal of objectivity, our determination to weigh rival hypotheses dispassionately. However, there is one view of the Holocaust that should not be considered at all in teaching the subject, and that is the view of the Holocaust-deniers. No other university history course, no course on the French Revolution, or World War I, has ever had to encounter the challenge that the events it covers never happened. Holocaust-denial is based on the premise that the avalanche of documents on the Holocaust were all forged by the "international Jewish conspiracy," that eye-witnesses are liars, that Jews have conspired to manufacture the most diabolical hoax in history. This premise is sometimes, insidiously, left unsaid. Instead, appealing to the ideal of academic freedom, Holocaust-deniers seek the opportunity to debate the evidence for the Holocaust in a university setting, in order to gain legitimacy as advocates of, "another point of view." It would be a mistake to include any literature by Holocaust-deniers in a syllabus on the Holocaust, even as a particularly sly example of antisemitism. Because of our ethos of objectivity, even such a backhanded recognition of Holocaust-denial literature, is a standing invitation to consider the merits of the case.

But recognizing such considerations is a far cry from the systematic appeal to emotions and moral sensibilities recommended by some academics.

Much of the literature I have discussed opposes the ideal of detached objectivity because, in the words of one critic: suspending one's own feelings and opinions, "leads to moral numbness."¹² To the contrary, the ideal of detached objectivity, at least in its classic Weberian liberal version, is itself an ethical stance, even a passionate one. If instead of preaching and moralizing about the Holocaust, I offer my students detached analysis of historiographical issues, argue for my preferred interpretation, but make the best possible

case for other interpretations, my message is that knowledge cannot be the servant of any one moral stance. Moral positions are subjective, a matter of personal choice, rather than objective validation. Such a recognition of pluralism in morals can lead not to indifference, but to a strong commitment to freedom and tolerance. By contrast, Emil Fackenheim's view that those who disagree that the Holocaust was unique, "insult" and "betray" the dead, makes disagreement a sin, and opts for intolerance.¹³

While knowledge cannot be the servant of any one moral stance, to draw from Weber again, knowledge can help clarify moral positions. To take an example: much of the scholarly literature on the Holocaust is taken up with the monumental moral failure of bystanders: why did the Pope not take a public stance against the genocide of European Jewry: why was the free world's refugee policy so ungenerous, why did the Americans not bomb Auschwitz? In my teaching, I raise the issue of the appropriateness of such questions, and their ethical premises. Why assume that humanitarian aid to non-Catholics should be a Papal priority; why assume that nation-states have a moral obligation to foreign minorities in distress? Such questions enable students to clarify their own moral stances, against a situation of ultimate human distress. For the rest, as an historian, I can only explain to my students what was done, or not done, and why, clarifying the moral premises held by bystanders, and setting forth the practical consequence of these moral premises. Students will have to make their own moral judgments. But this is hardly to be undervalued. In Weber's words: "We can force the individual...to give himself an account of the ultimate meaning of his own conduct....bringing about self-clarification and a sense of responsibility."¹⁴ Analytic detachment need not promote moral indifference, but can further awareness and sensitivity to the implications of one's moral choices.

Analytic detachment, skepticism about comprehensive explanations, recognition of the gap between fact and value, of the difficulty of validating favored moral or political prescriptions, may seem a woefully inadequate response to monumental suffering, and to the powerful and relentless force of hate behind the Holocaust. But accepting the modern fragmentation of knowledge behind such an approach, goes hand in hand with a respect for liberal values, no insubstantial defense against the fanaticism that made the Holocaust possible.

MONTREAL INSTITUTE FOR GENOCIDE STUDIES

The Institute is based in the Departments of History and Sociology at Concordia University. Its approach is comparative and historical, involving scholars in Canada, the United States, Great Britain, and France. It collects and disseminates knowledge about the historical origins of the mass killings that have become such a prominent part of the twentieth century. The Institute accomplishes its objectives through research, teaching, and publication. It has a special interest in promoting teaching about genocide in high schools, colleges, and universities. It seeks to acquire and to improve access to scholarly resources on genocide. It also seeks to encourage research by organizing seminars and workshops, and by offering the use of its resources and its hospitality to students and colleagues.

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- † Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, "The History and Sociology of Genocide - A Selective Bibliography." 1983, revised 1988. Published as Part III of Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn. *The History and Sociology of Genocide*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
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- † Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, "The History and Sociology of Genocidal Killings." 1986. Published as Chapter 3 in Israel W. Charny, ed. *Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review*. London: Mansell, 1988.
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- † Kurt Jonassohn, "The Consequences of Ideological Genocides and Their Role in Genocide Prevention." *Armenian Review*, vol.42, number 4/168 (Winter 1989) 1-16. (Appeared in Winter 1990)
- † Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, "Genocide: An Historical Overview." *Social Education* (The Official Journal of the National Council for the Social Studies) vol.55, number 2 (February 1991) 92-96, 129.
- Frank Chalk, "Introducing Genocide into the University Curriculum." April 1989.

† Papers that have been published since their first distribution are no longer available as Occasional Papers.

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